

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 10CHICAGO TRIBUNE
20 August 1983

Espionage and hindsight

One of the stranger aspects of espionage activities undertaken by a free society is that their history is never really lived; it is only relived, long after the fact. In totalitarian countries, the history of intelligence operations is never lived at all, of course, unless it suits the purpose of the regime in power. But here, events of the past have a way of eventually coming to light, to be judged against standards that may not have existed at the time they took place.

The Justice Department has just revealed that United States Army officers, charged with the duty of counterintelligence in Europe after World War II, recruited Klaus Barbie, the Gestapo "Butcher of Lyon," to spy against the Soviets. Later, these officers helped spirit Barbie to Bolivia where he avoided French prosecution on war crimes charges until this year, when Bolivia expelled him.

In retrospect, what the Army officers did seems to be a monumental error. And it probably does this country some good to express its moral revulsion now almost four decades after the event.

But that revulsion comes cheaply today. It is easy to forget the chaos in Europe after the war. Memory dims concerning the extraordinary way in which the Allied military machine, which had in league with Stalin thrown itself all out against Hitler, was thrown quickly in reverse to counter Stalin's designs on Europe.

In other words, the imperatives that operated in the days following the defeat of Germany no longer have much weight. That history has already been written. We know how it all came out. And so it is easy to express horror at the fact that Americans were willing to make accommodations with the likes of Barbie in order to try to defend against Stalin.

This is not to say that those Army officers were right in what they did. Or that as a nation the episode is one of which we should be proud or even indifferent. It is only to suggest that espionage is an activity that often strikes bargains with one devil in order to get at another and that it is easier, much easier, to show great moral sensitivity when decades have passed than it may have been for anyone when the evil breath was hot against his neck.

To say that espionage operates in a world without law against adversaries who do not share our moral values only begins the discussion. A society that thinks of itself as civilized and sensitive to moral questions must always try to strike an uneasy balance between its ideals and the practical imperatives of world conflict. Sometimes, as in the case of Barbie, it fails. But if the lesson is to mean anything for the bargains we strike today, it has to be taken in the fullness of the times which gave rise to it, not in the comfortable hindsight of four decades.